

## Portraying the Performing Artistes in Early India in the Context of Ancient Indian Scripters

**Dr. Ajesh T.V.**  
Lecturer, Department of Sanskrit,  
NSS College, Pandalam, 689501- Kerala, India.

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In ancient India theatrical performances were the main attractions for the people. Literary evidences prove that ancient Indian theatre is a comprehensive one and is a very popular for entertainment. Cultural arts like dancing, singing, puppet shows etc. were formulated and enacted from pre-Vedic period onwards. Historically, the origin of dance as a form of entertainment can be traced in the Indus valley period. The findings of archeological excavations from Mohenjo-Daro suggest that dance was very much popular in those days. ‘Some of the earliest representations of scenes of dancing occur in cave paintings found in Mesolithic rock shelters. Subsequently, finds of sculpture and representations on seals from Harappan civilization (c. 2700- 1800 BCE) have been taken to represent dancers.’<sup>1</sup> The posture of grey slate figure of a male dancer from Harappa reminds of tāṇḍava and supports the affinity between the male deity of Harappan culture and later Śiva. It seems that Indus people were interested in theatrical art very much<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars hold the view that theatrical performances developed from the instinct of primitive peoples to imitate the action of people and nature around them.<sup>3</sup> During their leisure they had cultivated various kinds of fine arts, music, dance etc. Further, it developed as theatrical art and it provides suitable jobs, artistic engagements and also a source of livelihood for men and women. Scholars suggest that performance tradition emerged probably from ritual contexts. A.L. Basham says, ‘as in most other civilizations there is little doubt that the Indian drama developed from ritual miming song and dance.’<sup>4</sup> A.B. Keith also shares this opinion. He states, ‘The Vedic ritual contained within themselves the germs of drama, yet there are nothing but elements of representation.’<sup>5</sup> Most probably dancing and singing were regarded as important features of ritual performances. Practice of various forms of performing arts in the socio-economic life of people has been traced in ancient Indian literature. ‘In Vedic period, music and dance can be divided mainly under two heads; ritual and secular/ social.’<sup>6</sup>

### Professional Artistes

The Vedic literature mentions some professional singers, e.g. Kāru (*Ṛgveda*, 9.112.3), Jaritā and Sūta (*Atharvaveda*, 5.11.8, *Vājasaneyīsamhitā* (6.18) and Gāyana (*Gopathabrāhmaṇa*, 1.1.9). *Ṛgveda* also refers to professional dancers (1.192.4). References to dancing and singing suggest that music and dance performances were held in solo (*Ṛgveda*, 1.83.6, 1.92.4, 10.71.11.), duet (*Ṛgveda*, 6.63.5, *Atharvaveda*, 5.12.7) sometimes in chorus (*Ṛgveda*, 1.6.6, 1.7.1, *Atharvaveda*, 4.1.15) form also.<sup>7</sup> *Atharvaveda* (2.36.1) also refers to public dance of women. Such women were known by the general term Naṭī, or Nāṭakīyā.<sup>8</sup> *Nāṭyaśāstra* also refers to them. Bharata’s Nāṭakīyā was a professional artiste who received proper training under the guidance of an Ācārya. According to the definition of Bharata, ‘Women who have physical beauty, good qualities, generosity, feminine charm, patience, and good manners, and who possess soft, sweet and charming voice, and varying notes in her throat, and who are experts in representation of passion, and feeling, know well of representation of the temperament, have sweetness of manners, are skilled in playing musical instruments, have a knowledge of notes, Tāla and Yati are associated with the master for the dramatic art, clever, skilled in acting, capable of using reasoning positive and negative, and have youthful age with beauty, are known as actresses (Nāṭakīyā).’<sup>9</sup> Later Saṁhitās refer to women participation in theatrical art especially in music and dance.<sup>10</sup> The word naṭa does not occur in Vedic literature. It is found for the first time in *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini (4.3.110-111) and there it means pantomime.<sup>11</sup> Naturally *Mahābhāṣya* (1.4.29) too refers to naṭa. Post-Vedic literature gives different terms for artistes. Their arts had different forms. Śailūṣa in *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa* (III.4.2.1) denotes an actor skilled in the four-fold abhinaya. Śailūṣa is a term often mentioned in many sources in the sense of a dancer. Among the other artistes Śobhanikas were probably pantomimes and Grantikas were recites. Kuśīlavas and Kathaka were referred to as actors.<sup>12</sup> Śailūṣa is mentioned in *Rāmāyaṇa* in the sense of an actor.<sup>13</sup> The *Rāmāyaṇa* records the performance of dance and drama.<sup>14</sup> In this connection Naṭa, Narttaka, Vādaka, and Tālāvacaaras are other artistes referred to in *Rāmāyaṇa*. *Ayodhyākāṇḍa* (6.14) says that artistes had their own troupes. *Mahābhārata* probably contain references much older than the time of its compilation and it refers to a very old tradition of professional artistes i.e. Naṭa, Narttaka, Malla, Māyāvī, Vaitālika, Sūta, Māgadha etc.<sup>15</sup> These professional artistes represent a community consisting of artistes from both the classical and folk traditions.<sup>16</sup> The Buddhist Nikāyas and Jātakas also speak of different types of entertainers. Jātaka stories inform that the family of actors learnt and adopted

their family-art as their family profession. Actors known from Buddhist literature were mostly folk artistes and they earn money through their art<sup>17</sup>

In *Arthaśāstra*, Nāṭa is mentioned as a community or a class. Their art was their profession, as source of their livelihood. *Arthaśāstra* mentions Kuśīlava as actor, and thus it seems that amalgamation of different performing arts has already begun.<sup>18</sup> It is generally believed that the term is derived from Kuśa and Lava of *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, twin sons of Rāma who sung *Rāmāyaṇa* for the first time.<sup>19</sup> According to *Nāṭyaśāstra* Kuśīlava was an important member of the dramatic troupe who has to organise different instrumentalists. It is on the basis of his capability, deep knowledge and unperturbed serenity he was known as Kuśīlava<sup>20</sup>

A.B. Keith thinks the mode of formation of the compound Kuśīlava is strange, in which the first member represents a woman's name. Perhaps it was due to the bad morals of such artistes that later, instead of Kuśālava, they came to be known as Kuśīlava (śīla, meaning manners, with prefix ku, denoting of bad morals).<sup>21</sup> 'The artistes, whose function was to recite the heroic deeds of ancient kings in a dramatic style, came to be known as Kuśīlavas, after the twin brothers of *Rāmāyaṇa*. Formerly they were reciters like later Kathakas but gradually their association with drama deepened and they became known as actors.'<sup>22</sup> In *Arthaśāstra* they appear as wandering artistes. Bards and dancers referred to as Virā<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>iyār, and Virā<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>ī (men and women of Pāṇar community) occupied a very important position in Sangam literature. They were very graceful dancers and appeared as wandering minstrels.<sup>23</sup> Actors, Dancers, and other professional artistes, both men and women, were viewed with disfavour in the Dharmaśāstras. Thus, all sources prove that in ancient period singing, dancing, acting and other forms of performing arts were practiced not only as forms of entertainment but also as a means of revenue and a livelihood at least by some sects of people.

## Notes

1 Kumkum Roy, *Historical Dictionary of Ancient India*, Scarecrow Press, United States, 2009, p.86.

2 Iravati, *Performing Artistes in Ancient India*, DK Print World, New Delhi, 2003, p.11.

3 *Ibid*, p.2.

4 A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Rupa & Co., New Delhi, 1997, p.385.

5 A.B. Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama in its Origin and Development; Theory and Practice*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1998, (reprint) pp.23-25.

6 Pranati Ghoshal, *Lifestyle of the Vedic People*, D.K. Print World, New Delhi, 2006, p.124.

7 *Ibid*, p.128.

8 Iravati, *Performing Artistes in Ancient India*, DK Print World, New Delhi, 2003, p.66.

9 See *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 34.48-50.

10 See *Taittirīyasamhitā*, 6.16.5, *Maittrāyaṇīsamhitā*, 3.7.3.

11 A.B. Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama in its Origin and Development; Theory and Practice*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1998, (reprint) p.31.

12 Iravati, *op.cit.*, p.16.

13 See *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīkī, 2.8.16, with the commentaries, *Tilaka, Śīromani and Bhūsana*, Śāstri Srinivasa Katti Mudholakara (Ed.), Parimal Publications, Delhi, 1990.

14 *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Ayodhyākāṇḍa*, 67.15.

15 *Śāntiparvan*, 69.60. See also *Anuśāsanaparvan* (33.12.), *Vanaparvan* (313.80).

16 Iravati, *op.cit.*, p.37.

17 *Ibid*.

18 *Ibid*, p.38.

19 A.B. Keith, *op.cit.*, p.31.

20 *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 35.106.

21 *Ibid.*

22 Iravati, *op.cit.*, pp.31-32.

23 See Vijaya Ramaswamy, in Kumkum Roy (Ed.), *op.cit.*, p.161.